

Rep. Sylvia Garcia
House Armed Services Committee
Member Day Remarks

Thank you, Mr. Chair, Ranking Member, and Committee Members for allowing me to speak here today. Our servicemembers represent the best of our country. As members of Congress, it is our duty to ensure that those who have served, are currently serving, and will serve in the future, maintain access to those rights and protections going forward.

This body has made significant strides in recent years legislating and overseeing improvements to protect and prevent Sexual Assault and Abuse, but our kids are still vulnerable. The New York Times released an article in July of 2022 that uncovered the sexual abuse of teens in the Military's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program and reported 33 JROTC instructors that were criminally charged.

The Department of Defense then acknowledged an unprecedented 58 instances of sexual abuse within the JROTC since 2017. Cadets enrolled in JROTC programs face the unique challenge of a particularly uneven power dynamic, with their adult instructors also serving as their "commanding officer." As a result, predators could leverage these power dynamics to coerce young victims and commit acts of sexual abuse. According to the Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute, 95% of sexual abuse is preventable through education. That means that direct access to sexual abuse prevention training is the most effective method of protecting our kids.

Which is why Rep. David Joyce and I partnered to introduce the bipartisan Shielding America's Youth from Exploitation (SAYFE) Act to ensure that these abuses never happen again and that children enrolled in these programs are protected. The SAYFE Act requires the Department of Defense to provide age-appropriate Sexual Assault and Abuse Prevention trainings to our JROTC cadets across the nation.

The lack of protection for JROTC cadets is not only a moral failing, but it also undermines military readiness. At a time when the United States is suffering from a recruitment crisis across all branches of the Armed Forces, our nation cannot afford to see a program as important as JROTC undermined by growing accounts of sexual abuse. Congress has a fundamental duty to protect these cadets and the SAYFE Act will do just that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share this consequential legislation for the committee's awareness. And I encourage all Members of the Armed Services Committee give this bipartisan bill into serious consideration for inclusion in this year's National Defense Authorization Act during the upcoming committee markup.

Thank you, and I yield back.